



Forensic Interviewing: The Basics

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What Is a Forensic Interview?

- Approached from a neutral perspective
 - Obtain factual information from children
 - Investigate if a crime MAY have occurred
 - NOT used to determine a child's veracity
 - Used in a medical or legal setting
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Forensic vs. Clinical Interview

Goal: to obtain information as reliable and accurate as possible

Fact-finding focus – accurate recollection of events important

Objectivity, neutrality, avoidance of biases

Court is the client

Consent to obtain outside information and disclose information is obtained and understood prior to proceeding with the interview

Interviews are formal and restrictive

Confidentiality restricted

Competency of client questioned

Recorded

Goal: to assess and provide treatment of symptoms

Therapeutic focus –
Attributions and perceptions of events important

Empathy, therapeutic alliance, support of Client

Child is the client

Client's consent required to seek external verification of information and to provide information to outside sources

Interviewing strategies are variable

Traditional confidentiality

Competency of client not the primary concern

Private

When to Use a Designated Forensic Interviewer?

- Children under the age of seven
 - Children with developmental disabilities
 - Chronic abuse is alleged
 - Children with significant emotional/behavioral symptoms
 - Multiple victim cases
 - Children who are reluctant to disclose
 - Stranger assault or abduction
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Forensic Interviewing

- Getting started
 - Information needed prior to interview
 - Decisions on interview strategy
 - Interview protocols
 - The Basics
 - The Semi-structured Cognitive Interview/NICHD Protocol
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Information Needed Prior to the Interview

- History of the allegation—a chronology of the disclosure, circumstances, including the child's exact words and response by others
 - Family constellation and child's names for significant others
 - Marital history of the parents, including information about current or past custody disputes
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Information Needed Prior to the Interview

- History of domestic violence
 - Family alcohol and drug abuse history
 - Academic history/cognitive functioning of child
 - Mental health issues/behavior changes
 - Communication difficulties/language proficiency
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Ethical Issues

- Limited or no confidentiality
 - Avoid dual roles
 - Multiple interviews are traumatic for children!
 - Joint investigations
 - Sharing information
 - Use of advocacy centers
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The Basics

- Interview length—not to exceed child's attention span
 - School aged children: No more than 50 minutes without a change in task.
 - Pre-school aged children: No more than 20-25 minutes without a change in task.
 - Special needs children: No more than 20-25 minutes without a change in task.
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The Basics

- Comfortable , neutral environment
 - Advocacy Centers
 - Child-friendly interview rooms
 - Neutral offices or classrooms
 - Minimize distractions
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The Basics

- Unbiased and friendly interviewer
 - Approach the interview as though you know nothing
 - Use information only to form cue questions if necessary
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The Basics

- Persons present
 - Ideally, the child should be interviewed alone.
 - If a support person is necessary, he/she must be instructed to remain quiet and not react emotionally.
 - Parties of a custody dispute may not serve as a support person.
 - Use of service animals
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The Basics

- Preserving the Interview
 - Video/digital recording
 - Audio recording
 - The problems with note-taking:
 - 60% of salient information is not recorded or misrepresented
 - Interrupts the flow of the interview
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The Basics

- Use of props
 - Dolls/stuffed animals
 - Drawings
 - Child's drawings
 - Child's written accounts
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Protocols Used In Arizona

- Semi-structured Cognitive Interview
 - NICHD Protocol
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Common Elements

- Rapport and language sample
 - Instructions & motivating truthfulness
 - Inviting narrative
 - Open-ended questions
 - Cue questions
 - Direct questions
 - Neutral closure
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Rapport and Language Sample

- Ask open-ended question about neutral topics
 - Obtain two descriptions about neutral events
 - People, places or things (school, family)
 - Event in time (last birthday, holiday, field trip)
- Obtain a sample of uninterrupted speech
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Instructions

- Instructions about:
 - Child is the expert
 - Not understanding a question
 - Not knowing or remembering an answer
 - Correcting the interviewer
 - Repeated questions
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Motivating Truthfulness

- Important to talk about what really happened
 - Elicit a promise to tell the truth
 - More likely to tell the truth if a promise is elicited (Lyon & Dorado, 2008)
 - Truth induction is more effective than distinguishing between truth and lie
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Narrative Invitation

- Free recall memory most accurate
 - Do not interrupt the child's narrative
 - "How come you came to talk to me today."
 - "I heard something may have happened to you. Tell me everything about that."
 - "I heard you may have seen something happen. Tell me everything about that."
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Script Memory

- General descriptions about how the abusive events typically happened.
 - Necessary to help children describe episodic memories
 - “Did this happen one time or more than one time?”
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Open-Ended Questions

- Used to direct child from script memory to episodic memory
 - Tell me about the last time
 - Tell me about the first time
 - Tell me about the time you remember most clearly
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Cue Questions

- Used to clarify information provided in narrative
 - Incorporate one or two words from case facts to elicit disclosure or information
 - Cues on places, locations of others
 - ALWAYS followed by requesting narrative
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Cue Questions—To Elicit Disclosure

- I heard something about a note you wrote to your teacher. Tell me about that.
 - I heard your mom might be worried about you. Tell me about that.
 - I heard you had to go to a doctor. Tell me about that.
 - I heard the police came to your house. Tell me about that.
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Direct or Focused Questions

- May be necessary, especially with younger children, or about acts not previously disclosed
 - Structure the questions so that they are the least leading or suggestive as possible
 - Wh—questions: where, who, what, how
 - Minimize yes/no, multiple choice or forced choice questions
 - Follow direct questions with narrative request
 - Avoid suggestive, tag, or coercive questions
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Questions that may be useful in DV cases:

- What happens when you get into trouble?
 - What happens when your mom/dad get mad?
 - What happens when your mom/dad get mad at each other?
 - What types of things do your mom and dad say about each other?
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Avoid!

- Suggestive questions—Did daddy hit your mommy?
 - Tag questions—Daddy hit your mommy, didn't he?
 - Coercive questions—If you don't tell me about daddy hitting your mommy, he could hurt someone else. You don't want that to happen, do you?
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Eliciting a Disclosure—How Far Can One Go?

- Tell me what happened—request a narrative
 - 4-5 Cue questions
 - Direct non-leading—Has someone been bothering you/someone you know in a way you didn't like?
 - Direct—Has something happened to your _____?
 - As a last resort—I heard something about "suspect." Tell me about that.
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Neutral Closure

- Return to talking about neutral topics—TV, movies, music, plans for after the interview
 - Do not leave the child distressed
 - Thank the child for talking with you
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Establishing the Elements for Each Incident

- Where?
 - Who was present? Where others were?
 - What happened?
 - How it happened?
 - When?
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When? Difficulties with Time Frames

- Ability to place events in time begins at age 10
 - Establish time frame by:
 - Place of residence
 - School references
 - Location of significant others
 - Order of events
 - Written time lines
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When? Don't Ask . . .

- Children under ten
 - How many times?
 - Before or after?
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Why? Don't Ask--

- Don't ask why!
 - Why not?
 - Requires cause and effect thinking
 - Require child to take someone else's perspective
 - Sounds accusatory
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The Art of Interviewing

- Repeating, paraphrasing
 - Listening
 - Avoiding judgment
 - Providing encouragement
 - Patience
 - SILENCE REALLY IS GOLDEN
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Helpful Hints

- Do not make assumptions about child's feelings
 - Have child sit at your eye level
 - Allow child as much control as possible
 - Assume child will take breaks from subject
 - Pay attention to verbal cues indicating script memory-always, mostly or shifts to present tense of verbs
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Helpful Hints

- Expect the Unexpected
 - Be flexible
 - Unexpected disclosures
 - Interruptions
 - Additional interviews
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Last but not Least:

- Do not forget that there is NO perfect interview.

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Information on Basic Forensic Interview Training (BFIT):

- Please contact Rob Bell, Children's Justice Coordinator, Childhelp Children's Center
 - 602 271-4500 or email at rbell@childhelp.org
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